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STEPHEN D. COAN
STATE FIRE MARSHAL

TO: Heads of Fire Departments

FROM: Stephen D. Coan, State Fire Marshal

Re: Revised Recommendations for Management of Suspicious or Threat Letters and Substances

DATE: March 7, 2012

Although a decade has passed since the Amerithrax (anthrax) attacks of 2001, threats and suspicious substances continue to be sent by mail and items present as suspicious in many environments. Due to the current spate of suspicious letters, the Department of Fire Services is taking the opportunity to revise guidance to fire departments in managing these risks.

The following guidance supercedes all past recommendations on the handling of suspicious letters, white powder calls, etc. This updated guidance is consistent with practices and recommendations of the Department of Public Health Bioterrorism Laboratory.

Assess the level of risk

It is recommended that the responding officials assess the situation and determine the level of risk according to the following categories:

No Apparent Risk

Specimens in this category include powder, particulate matter or liquid found in a likely location with an obvious explanation and no evident threat (i.e. white powder in a coffee shop).

Department of Public Health (DPH), Hinton State Laboratory Institute (HSLI) testing is **not recommended**. These samples can be disposed of in the regular trash.

Low Risk

Specimens in this category include unusual powders, particulate matter or liquid found in a location with no obvious explanation, but no known threat. This includes mail with unknown powder, but no expressed threat.

Sample submission to the HSLI is **recommended**. If it is determined that the specimen will be sent to the HSLI, the State Laboratory requires pre-screening. Therefore, it is recommended a Tier 1 Hazmat Response is initiated. (877) 385-0822.

High Risk

Specimens in this category include any substance or object associated with (a) written or verbal **threat**; (b) an unusual event determined by public safety and/or public health officials to be of high risk; and/or (c) occurrence of human illness associated with the situation.

Priority sample submission to HSLI is **necessary** in these cases. If it is determined that the specimen will be sent to the HSLI, the State Laboratory requires pre-screening. Therefore, it is recommended a Tier 1 Hazmat Response is initiated. (877) 385-0822.

General Incident Management Recommendations

- DO NOT OPEN THE LETTER, CONTAINER, OR PACKAGE.
- Isolate the letter, and initiate a Tier 1 Hazmat Response. (877) 385-0822
- Isolate the room where the suspicious object/substance is located and the adjoining areas.
- Try not to disturb the powder.
- Anyone that handled the letter or substance should wash their hands with soap and warm water.
- Any exposed personnel should be isolated from non-exposed persons and screened (an interview at minimum) for possible contamination and remain on scene until they can be briefed regarding follow-up, then released.
- Gather a list of all people who have come in contact with the letter (Include Name, Address, and Phone Number).
- If the box/package/envelope is sealed and has a thickness greater than a folded sheet of paper, AND/OR the item is suspected to involve explosives, incendiary devices, AND/OR the item is suspected to contain batteries, wires, switches, glass, or metal, THEN ALSO Call State Police Bomb Squad (508) 820-2121.

Notification of low and high-risk specimens

1. Call the MA State Public Health Laboratory Bioterrorism (BT) / Chemical Terrorism (CT) 24/7 phone to consult on testing options. (617) 590-6390.
2. Local public health officials and law enforcement should be notified according to local protocols. The Joint Terrorism Task Force should be notified of high risk events

Specimen transport of low and high-risk specimens

1. Call the BT/CT 24/7 phone **before transporting any specimens** to HSLI.
(617) 590-6390
2. Transport samples to the HSLI specimen receiving area (right side, front entrance). Hinton State Laboratory Institute, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130.
3. Local authorities are responsible for transportation of the specimen to the HSLI.